

CHAPTER ELEVEN



THE FIREBOLT

Harry didn't have a very clear idea of how he had managed to get back into the Honeydukes cellar, through the tunnel, and into the castle once more. All he knew was that the return trip seemed to take no time at all, and that he hardly noticed what he was doing, because his head was still pounding with the conversation he had just heard.

Why had nobody ever told him? Dumbledore, Hagrid, Mr. Weasley, Cornelius Fudge . . . Why hadn't anyone ever mentioned the fact that Harry's parents had died because their best friend had betrayed them?

Ron and Hermione watched Harry nervously all through dinner, not daring to talk about what they'd overheard, because Percy was sitting close by them. When they went upstairs to the crowded common room, it was to find Fred and George had set off half a dozen Dungbombs in a fit of end-of-term high spirits. Harry, who didn't want Fred and George asking him whether he'd reached Hogsmeade or not, sneaked quietly up to the empty dormitory and headed straight for his bedside cabinet. He pushed his books aside and quickly found what he was looking for — the leather-bound photo album Hagrid had given him two years ago, which was full of wizard pictures of his mother and father. He sat down on his bed, drew the hangings around him, and started turning the pages, searching, until . . .

He stopped on a picture of his parents' wedding day. There was his father waving up at him, beaming, the untidy black hair Harry had inherited

standing up in all directions. There was his mother, alight with happiness, arm in arm with his dad. And there . . . that must be him. Their best man . . . Harry had never given him a thought before.

If he hadn't known it was the same person, he would never have guessed it was Black in this old photograph. His face wasn't sunken and waxy, but handsome, full of laughter. Had he already been working for Voldemort when this picture had been taken? Was he already planning the deaths of the two people next to him? Did he realize he was facing twelve years in Azkaban, twelve years that would make him unrecognizable?

But the dementors don't affect him, Harry thought, staring into the handsome, laughing face. *He doesn't have to hear my mum screaming if they get too close —*

Harry slammed the album shut, reached over and stuffed it back into his cabinet, took off his robe and glasses and got into bed, making sure the hangings were hiding him from view.

The dormitory door opened.

"Harry?" said Ron's voice uncertainly.

But Harry lay still, pretending to be asleep. He heard Ron leave again, and rolled over on his back, his eyes wide open.

A hatred such as he had never known before was coursing through Harry like poison. He could see Black laughing at him through the darkness, as though somebody had pasted the picture from the album over his eyes. He watched, as though somebody was playing him a piece of film, Sirius Black blasting Peter Pettigrew (who resembled Neville Longbottom) into a thousand pieces. He could hear (though having no idea what Black's voice might sound like) a low, excited mutter. "It has happened, my Lord . . . the Potters have made me their Secret-Keeper. . . ." And then came another voice, laughing shrilly, the same laugh that Harry heard inside his head whenever the dementors drew near. . . .

"Harry, you — you look terrible."

Harry hadn't gotten to sleep until daybreak. He had awoken to find the

dormitory deserted, dressed, and gone down the spiral staircase to a common room that was completely empty except for Ron, who was eating a Peppermint Toad and massaging his stomach, and Hermione, who had spread her homework over three tables.

“Where is everyone?” said Harry.

“Gone! It’s the first day of the holidays, remember?” said Ron, watching Harry closely. “It’s nearly lunchtime; I was going to come and wake you up in a minute.”

Harry slumped into a chair next to the fire. Snow was still falling outside the windows. Crookshanks was spread out in front of the fire like a large, ginger rug.

“You really don’t look well, you know,” Hermione said, peering anxiously into his face.

“I’m fine,” said Harry.

“Harry, listen,” said Hermione, exchanging a look with Ron, “you must be really upset about what we heard yesterday. But the thing is, you mustn’t go doing anything stupid.”

“Like what?” said Harry.

“Like trying to go after Black,” said Ron sharply.

Harry could tell they had rehearsed this conversation while he had been asleep. He didn’t say anything.

“You won’t, will you, Harry?” said Hermione.

“Because Black’s not worth dying for,” said Ron.

Harry looked at them. They didn’t seem to understand at all.

“D’you know what I see and hear every time a dementor gets too near me?” Ron and Hermione shook their heads, looking apprehensive. “I can hear my mum screaming and pleading with Voldemort. And if you’d heard your mum screaming like that, just about to be killed, you wouldn’t forget it in a hurry. And if you found out someone who was supposed to be a friend of hers betrayed her and sent Voldemort after her —”

“There’s nothing you can do!” said Hermione, looking stricken. “The dementors will catch Black and he’ll go back to Azkaban and — and serve him right!”

“You heard what Fudge said. Black isn’t affected by Azkaban like normal people are. It’s not a punishment for him like it is for the others.”

“So what are you saying?” said Ron, looking very tense. “You want to — to kill Black or something?”

“Don’t be silly,” said Hermione in a panicky voice. “Harry doesn’t want to kill anyone, do you, Harry?”

Again, Harry didn’t answer. He didn’t know what he wanted to do. All he knew was that the idea of doing nothing, while Black was at liberty, was almost more than he could stand.

“Malfoy knows,” he said abruptly. “Remember what he said to me in Potions? ‘If it was me, I’d hunt him down myself. . . . I’d want revenge.’”

“You’re going to take Malfoy’s advice instead of ours?” said Ron furiously. “Listen . . . you know what Pettigrew’s mother got back after Black had finished with him? Dad told me — the Order of Merlin, First Class, and Pettigrew’s finger in a box. That was the biggest bit of him they could find. Black’s a madman, Harry, and he’s dangerous —”

“Malfoy’s dad must have told him,” said Harry, ignoring Ron. “He was right in Voldemort’s inner circle —”

“*Say You-Know-Who, will you?*” interjected Ron angrily.

“— so obviously, the Malfoys knew Black was working for Voldemort —”

“— and Malfoy’d love to see you blown into about a million pieces, like Pettigrew! Get a grip. Malfoy’s just hoping you’ll get yourself killed before he has to play you at Quidditch.”

“Harry, *please*,” said Hermione, her eyes now shining with tears, “*please* be sensible. Black did a terrible, terrible thing, but d-don’t put yourself in danger, it’s what Black wants. . . . Oh, Harry, you’d be playing right into Black’s hands if you went looking for him. Your mum and dad wouldn’t want

you to get hurt, would they? They'd never want you to go looking for Black!"

"I'll never know what they'd have wanted, because thanks to Black, I've never spoken to them," said Harry shortly.

There was a silence in which Crookshanks stretched luxuriously, flexing his claws. Ron's pocket quivered.

"Look," said Ron, obviously casting around for a change of subject, "it's the holidays! It's nearly Christmas! Let's — let's go down and see Hagrid. We haven't visited him for ages!"

"No!" said Hermione quickly. "Harry isn't supposed to leave the castle, Ron —"

"Yeah, let's go," said Harry, sitting up, "and I can ask him how come he never mentioned Black when he told me all about my parents!"

Further discussion of Sirius Black plainly wasn't what Ron had had in mind.

"Or we could have a game of chess," he said hastily, "or Gobstones. Percy left a set —"

"No, let's visit Hagrid," said Harry firmly.

So they got their cloaks from their dormitories and set off through the portrait hole ("Stand and fight, you yellow-bellied mongrels!"), down through the empty castle and out through the oak front doors.

They made their way slowly down the lawn, making a shallow trench in the glittering, powdery snow, their socks and the hems of their cloaks soaked and freezing. The Forbidden Forest looked as though it had been enchanted, each tree smattered with silver, and Hagrid's cabin looked like an iced cake.

Ron knocked, but there was no answer.

"He's not out, is he?" said Hermione, who was shivering under her cloak.

Ron had his ear to the door.

"There's a weird noise," he said. "Listen — is that Fang?"

Harry and Hermione put their ears to the door too. From inside the cabin

came a series of low, throbbing moans.

“Think we’d better go and get someone?” said Ron nervously.

“Hagrid!” called Harry, thumping the door. “Hagrid, are you in there?”

There was a sound of heavy footsteps, then the door creaked open. Hagrid stood there with his eyes red and swollen, tears splashing down the front of his leather vest.

“Yeh’ve heard?” he bellowed, and he flung himself onto Harry’s neck.

Hagrid being at least twice the size of a normal man, this was no laughing matter. Harry, about to collapse under Hagrid’s weight, was rescued by Ron and Hermione, who each seized Hagrid under an arm and heaved him back into the cabin. Hagrid allowed himself to be steered into a chair and slumped over the table, sobbing uncontrollably, his face glazed with tears that dripped down into his tangled beard.

“Hagrid, what is it?” said Hermione, aghast.

Harry spotted an official-looking letter lying open on the table.

“What’s this, Hagrid?”

Hagrid’s sobs redoubled, but he shoved the letter toward Harry, who picked it up and read aloud:

Dear Mr. Hagrid,

Further to our inquiry into the attack by a hippogriff on a student in your class, we have accepted the assurances of Professor Dumbledore that you bear no responsibility for the regrettable incident.

“Well, that’s okay then, Hagrid!” said Ron, clapping Hagrid on the shoulder. But Hagrid continued to sob, and waved one of his gigantic hands, inviting Harry to read on.

However, we must register our concern about the hippogriff in question. We have decided to uphold the official complaint of Mr. Lucius Malfoy, and this matter will therefore be taken to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. The hearing will take place on April 20th, and we ask you to present yourself and your hippogriff at the

Committee's offices in London on that date. In the meantime, the hippogriff should be kept tethered and isolated.

Yours in fellowship . . .

There followed a list of the school governors.

"Oh," said Ron. "But you said Buckbeak isn't a bad hippogriff, Hagrid. I bet he'll get off —"

"Yeh don' know them gargoyles at the Committee fer the Disposal o' Dangerous Creatures!" choked Hagrid, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. "They've got it in fer interestin' creatures!"

A sudden sound from the corner of Hagrid's cabin made Harry, Ron, and Hermione whip around. Buckbeak the hippogriff was lying in the corner, chomping on something that was oozing blood all over the floor.

"I couldn' leave him tied up out there in the snow!" choked Hagrid. "All on his own! At Christmas."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked at one another. They had never seen eye to eye with Hagrid about what he called "interesting creatures" and other people called "terrifying monsters." On the other hand, there didn't seem to be any particular harm in Buckbeak. In fact, by Hagrid's usual standards, he was positively cute.

"You'll have to put up a good strong defense, Hagrid," said Hermione, sitting down and laying a hand on Hagrid's massive forearm. "I'm sure you can prove Buckbeak is safe."

"Won't make no diff'rence!" sobbed Hagrid. "Them Disposal devils, they're all in Lucius Malfoy's pocket! Scared o' him! An' if I lose the case, Buckbeak —"

Hagrid drew his finger swiftly across his throat, then gave a great wail and lurched forward, his face in his arms.

"What about Dumbledore, Hagrid?" said Harry.

"He's done more'n enough fer me already," groaned Hagrid. "Got enough on his plate what with keepin' them dementors outta the castle, an' Sirius

Black lurkin' around —”

Ron and Hermione looked quickly at Harry, as though expecting him to start berating Hagrid for not telling him the truth about Black. But Harry couldn't bring himself to do it, not now that he saw Hagrid so miserable and scared.

“Listen, Hagrid,” he said, “you can't give up. Hermione's right, you just need a good defense. You can call us as witnesses —”

“I'm sure I've read about a case of hippogriff-baiting,” said Hermione thoughtfully, “where the hippogriff got off. I'll look it up for you, Hagrid, and see exactly what happened.”

Hagrid howled still more loudly. Harry and Hermione looked at Ron to help them.

“Er — shall I make a cup of tea?” said Ron.

Harry stared at him.

“It's what my mum does whenever someone's upset,” Ron muttered, shrugging.

At last, after many more assurances of help, with a steaming mug of tea in front of him, Hagrid blew his nose on a handkerchief the size of a tablecloth and said, “Yer right. I can' afford to go ter pieces. Gotta pull meself together. . . .”

Fang the boarhound came timidly out from under the table and laid his head on Hagrid's knee.

“I've not bin meself lately,” said Hagrid, stroking Fang with one hand and mopping his face with the other. “Worried abou' Buckbeak, an' no one likin' me classes —”

“We do like them!” lied Hermione at once.

“Yeah, they're great!” said Ron, crossing his fingers under the table. “Er — how are the flobberworms?”

“Dead,” said Hagrid gloomily. “Too much lettuce.”

“Oh no!” said Ron, his lip twitching.

“An’ them dementors make me feel ruddy terrible an’ all,” said Hagrid, with a sudden shudder. “Gotta walk past ’em ev’ry time I want a drink in the Three Broomsticks. ’S like bein’ back in Azkaban —”

He fell silent, gulping his tea. Harry, Ron, and Hermione watched him breathlessly. They had never heard Hagrid talk about his brief spell in Azkaban before. After a pause, Hermione said timidly, “Is it awful in there, Hagrid?”

“Yeh’ve no idea,” said Hagrid quietly. “Never bin anywhere like it. Thought I was goin’ mad. Kep’ goin’ over horrible stuff in me mind . . . the day I got expelled from Hogwarts . . . day me dad died . . . day I had ter let Norbert go. . . .”

His eyes filled with tears. Norbert was the baby dragon Hagrid had once won in a game of cards.

“Yeh can’ really remember who yeh are after a while. An’ yeh can’ see the point o’ livin’ at all. I used ter hope I’d jus’ die in me sleep. . . . When they let me out, it was like bein’ born again, ev’rythin’ came floodin’ back, it was the bes’ feelin’ in the world. Mind, the dementors weren’t keen on lettin’ me go.”

“But you were innocent!” said Hermione.

Hagrid snorted.

“Think that matters to them? They don’ care. Long as they’ve got a couple o’ hundred humans stuck there with ’em, so they can leech all the happiness out of ’em, they don’ give a damn who’s guilty an’ who’s not.”

Hagrid went quiet for a moment, staring into his tea. Then he said quietly, “Thought o’ jus’ letting Buckbeak go . . . tryin’ ter make him fly away . . . but how d’yeh explain ter a hippogriff it’s gotta go inter hidin’? An’ — an’ I’m scared o’ breakin’ the law. . . .” He looked up at them, tears leaking down his face again. “I don’ ever want ter go back ter Azkaban.”

The trip to Hagrid’s, though far from fun, had nevertheless had the effect Ron and Hermione had hoped. Though Harry had by no means forgotten about Black, he couldn’t brood constantly on revenge if he wanted to help

Hagrid win his case against the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures. He, Ron, and Hermione went to the library the next day and returned to the empty common room laden with books that might help prepare a defense for Buckbeak. The three of them sat in front of the roaring fire, slowly turning the pages of dusty volumes about famous cases of marauding beasts, speaking occasionally when they ran across something relevant.

“Here’s something . . . there was a case in 1722 . . . but the hippogriff was convicted — ugh, look what they did to it, that’s disgusting —”

“This might help, look — a mantichore savaged someone in 1296, and they let the mantichore off — oh — no, that was only because everyone was too scared to go near it. . . .”

Meanwhile, in the rest of the castle, the usual magnificent Christmas decorations had been put up, despite the fact that hardly any of the students remained to enjoy them. Thick streamers of holly and mistletoe were strung along the corridors, mysterious lights shone from inside every suit of armor, and the Great Hall was filled with its usual twelve Christmas trees, glittering with golden stars. A powerful and delicious smell of cooking pervaded the corridors, and by Christmas Eve, it had grown so strong that even Scabbers poked his nose out of the shelter of Ron’s pocket to sniff hopefully at the air.

On Christmas morning, Harry was woken by Ron throwing his pillow at him.

“Oi! Presents!”

Harry reached for his glasses and put them on, squinting through the semi-darkness to the foot of his bed, where a small heap of parcels had appeared. Ron was already ripping the paper off his own presents.

“Another sweater from Mum . . . maroon *again* . . . see if you’ve got one.”

Harry had. Mrs. Weasley had sent him a scarlet sweater with the Gryffindor lion knitted on the front; also a dozen home-baked mince pies, some Christmas cake, and a box of nut brittle. As he moved all these things aside, he saw a long, thin package lying underneath.

“What’s that?” said Ron, looking over, a freshly unwrapped pair of maroon

socks in his hand.

“Dunno . . .”

Harry ripped the parcel open and gasped as a magnificent, gleaming broomstick rolled out onto his bedspread. Ron dropped his socks and jumped off his bed for a closer look.

“I don’t believe it,” he said hoarsely.

It was a Firebolt, identical to the dream broom Harry had gone to see every day in Diagon Alley. Its handle glittered as he picked it up. He could feel it vibrating and let go; it hung in midair, unsupported, at exactly the right height for him to mount it. His eyes moved from the golden registration number at the top of the handle, right down to the perfectly smooth, streamlined birch twigs that made up the tail.

“Who sent it to you?” said Ron in a hushed voice.

“Look and see if there’s a card,” said Harry.

Ron ripped apart the Firebolt’s wrappings.

“Nothing! Blimey, who’d spend that much on you?”

“Well,” said Harry, feeling stunned, “I’m betting it wasn’t the Dursleys.”

“I bet it was Dumbledore,” said Ron, now walking around and around the Firebolt, taking in every glorious inch. “He sent you the Invisibility Cloak anonymously. . . .”

“That was my dad’s, though,” said Harry. “Dumbledore was just passing it on to me. He wouldn’t spend hundreds of Galleons on me. He can’t go giving students stuff like this —”

“That’s why he wouldn’t say it was from him!” said Ron. “In case some git like Malfoy said it was favoritism. Hey, Harry” — Ron gave a great whoop of laughter — “*Malfoy!* Wait till he sees you on this! He’ll be sick as a pig! This is an *international* standard broom, this is!”

“I can’t believe this,” Harry muttered, running a hand along the Firebolt, while Ron sank onto Harry’s bed, laughing his head off at the thought of Malfoy. “*Who* — ?”

“I know,” said Ron, controlling himself, “I know who it could’ve been — Lupin!”

“What?” said Harry, now starting to laugh himself. “*Lupin?* Listen, if he had this much gold, he’d be able to buy himself some new robes.”

“Yeah, but he likes you,” said Ron. “And he was away when your Nimbus got smashed, and he might’ve heard about it and decided to visit Diagon Alley and get this for you —”

“What d’you mean, he was away?” said Harry. “He was ill when I was playing in that match.”

“Well, he wasn’t in the hospital wing,” said Ron. “I was there, cleaning out the bedpans on that detention from Snape, remember?”

Harry frowned at Ron.

“I can’t see Lupin affording something like this.”

“What’re you two laughing about?”

Hermione had just come in, wearing her dressing gown and carrying Crookshanks, who was looking very grumpy, with a string of tinsel tied around his neck.

“Don’t bring him in here!” said Ron, hurriedly snatching Scabbers from the depths of his bed and stowing him in his pajama pocket. But Hermione wasn’t listening. She dropped Crookshanks onto Seamus’s empty bed and stared, open-mouthed, at the Firebolt.

“Oh, *Harry!* Who sent you *that?*”

“No idea,” said Harry. “There wasn’t a card or anything with it.”

To his great surprise, Hermione did not appear either excited or intrigued by the news. On the contrary, her face fell, and she bit her lip.

“What’s the matter with you?” said Ron.

“I don’t know,” said Hermione slowly, “but it’s a bit odd, isn’t it? I mean, this is supposed to be quite a good broom, isn’t it?”

Ron sighed exasperatedly.

“It’s the best broom there is, Hermione,” he said.

“So it must’ve been really expensive. . . .”

“Probably cost more than all the Slytherins’ brooms put together,” said Ron happily.

“Well . . . who’d send Harry something as expensive as that, and not even tell him they’d sent it?” said Hermione.

“Who cares?” said Ron impatiently. “Listen, Harry, can I have a go on it? Can I?”

“I don’t think anyone should ride that broom just yet!” said Hermione shrilly.

Harry and Ron looked at her.

“What d’you think Harry’s going to do with it — sweep the floor?” said Ron.

But before Hermione could answer, Crookshanks sprang from Seamus’s bed, right at Ron’s chest.

“GET — HIM — OUT — OF — HERE!” Ron bellowed as Crookshanks’s claws ripped his pajamas and Scabbers attempted a wild escape over his shoulder. Ron seized Scabbers by the tail and aimed a misjudged kick at Crookshanks that hit the trunk at the end of Harry’s bed, knocking it over and causing Ron to hop up and down, howling with pain.

Crookshanks’s fur suddenly stood on end. A shrill, tinny whistling was filling the room. The Pocket Sneakoscope had become dislodged from Uncle Vernon’s old socks and was whirling and gleaming on the floor.

“I forgot about that!” Harry said, bending down and picking up the Sneakoscope. “I never wear those socks if I can help it. . . .”

The Sneakoscope whirled and whistled in his palm. Crookshanks was hissing and spitting at it.

“You’d better take that cat out of here, Hermione,” said Ron furiously, sitting on Harry’s bed nursing his toe. “Can’t you shut that thing up?” he added to Harry as Hermione strode out of the room, Crookshanks’s yellow

eyes still fixed maliciously on Ron.

Harry stuffed the Sneakoscope back inside the socks and threw it back into his trunk. All that could be heard now were Ron's stifled moans of pain and rage. Scabbers was huddled in Ron's hands. It had been a while since Harry had seen him out of Ron's pocket, and he was unpleasantly surprised to see that Scabbers, once so fat, was now very skinny; patches of fur seemed to have fallen out too.

"He's not looking too good, is he?" Harry said.

"It's stress!" said Ron. "He'd be fine if that big stupid furball left him alone!"

But Harry, remembering what the woman at the Magical Menagerie had said about rats living only three years, couldn't help feeling that unless Scabbers had powers he had never revealed, he was reaching the end of his life. And despite Ron's frequent complaints that Scabbers was both boring and useless, he was sure Ron would be very miserable if Scabbers died.

Christmas spirit was definitely thin on the ground in the Gryffindor common room that morning. Hermione had shut Crookshanks in her dormitory, but was furious with Ron for trying to kick him; Ron was still fuming about Crookshanks's fresh attempt to eat Scabbers. Harry gave up trying to make them talk to each other and devoted himself to examining the Firebolt, which he had brought down to the common room with him. For some reason this seemed to annoy Hermione as well; she didn't say anything, but she kept looking darkly at the broom as though it too had been criticizing her cat.

At lunchtime they went down to the Great Hall, to find that the House tables had been moved against the walls again, and that a single table, set for twelve, stood in the middle of the room. Professors Dumbledore, McGonagall, Snape, Sprout, and Flitwick were there, along with Filch, the caretaker, who had taken off his usual brown coat and was wearing a very old and rather moldy-looking tailcoat. There were only three other students, two extremely nervous-looking first years and a sullen-faced Slytherin fifth year.

"Merry Christmas!" said Dumbledore as Harry, Ron, and Hermione

approached the table. “As there are so few of us, it seemed foolish to use the House tables. . . . Sit down, sit down!”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione sat down side by side at the end of the table.

“Crackers!” said Dumbledore enthusiastically, offering the end of a large silver noisemaker to Snape, who took it reluctantly and tugged. With a bang like a gunshot, the cracker flew apart to reveal a large, pointed witch’s hat topped with a stuffed vulture.

Harry, remembering the boggart, caught Ron’s eye and they both grinned; Snape’s mouth thinned and he pushed the hat toward Dumbledore, who swapped it for his wizard’s hat at once.

“Dig in!” he advised the table, beaming around.

As Harry was helping himself to roast potatoes, the doors of the Great Hall opened again. It was Professor Trelawney, gliding toward them as though on wheels. She had put on a green sequined dress in honor of the occasion, making her look more than ever like a glittering, oversized dragonfly.

“Sybill, this is a pleasant surprise!” said Dumbledore, standing up.

“I have been crystal gazing, Headmaster,” said Professor Trelawney in her mistiest, most faraway voice, “and to my astonishment, I saw myself abandoning my solitary luncheon and coming to join you. Who am I to refuse the promptings of fate? I at once hastened from my tower, and I do beg you to forgive my lateness. . . .”

“Certainly, certainly,” said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. “Let me draw you up a chair —”

And he did indeed draw a chair in midair with his wand, which revolved for a few seconds before falling with a thud between Professors Snape and McGonagall. Professor Trelawney, however, did not sit down; her enormous eyes had been roving around the table, and she suddenly uttered a kind of soft scream.

“I dare not, Headmaster! If I join the table, we shall be thirteen! Nothing could be more unlucky! Never forget that when thirteen dine together, the first to rise will be the first to die!”

“We’ll risk it, Sybill,” said Professor McGonagall impatiently. “Do sit down, the turkey’s getting stone cold.”

Professor Trelawney hesitated, then lowered herself into the empty chair, eyes shut and mouth clenched tight, as though expecting a thunderbolt to hit the table. Professor McGonagall poked a large spoon into the nearest tureen.

“Tripe, Sybill?”

Professor Trelawney ignored her. Eyes open again, she looked around once more and said, “But where is dear Professor Lupin?”

“I’m afraid the poor fellow is ill again,” said Dumbledore, indicating that everybody should start serving themselves. “Most unfortunate that it should happen on Christmas Day.”

“But surely you already knew that, Sybill?” said Professor McGonagall, her eyebrows raised.

Professor Trelawney gave Professor McGonagall a very cold look.

“Certainly I knew, Minerva,” she said quietly. “But one does not parade the fact that one is All-Knowing. I frequently act as though I am not possessed of the Inner Eye, so as not to make others nervous.”

“That explains a great deal,” said Professor McGonagall tartly.

Professor Trelawney’s voice suddenly became a good deal less misty.

“If you must know, Minerva, I have seen that poor Professor Lupin will not be with us for very long. He seems aware, himself, that his time is short. He positively fled when I offered to crystal gaze for him —”

“Imagine that,” said Professor McGonagall dryly.

“I doubt,” said Dumbledore, in a cheerful but slightly raised voice, which put an end to Professor McGonagall and Professor Trelawney’s conversation, “that Professor Lupin is in any immediate danger. Severus, you’ve made the potion for him again?”

“Yes, Headmaster,” said Snape.

“Good,” said Dumbledore. “Then he should be up and about in no time. . . .

Derek, have you had any of these chipolatas? They're excellent."

The first-year boy went furiously red on being addressed directly by Dumbledore, and took the platter of sausages with trembling hands.

Professor Trelawney behaved almost normally until the very end of Christmas dinner, two hours later. Full to bursting with Christmas dinner and still wearing their party hats, Harry and Ron got up first from the table and she shrieked loudly.

"My dears! Which of you left his seat first? Which?"

"Dunno," said Ron, looking uneasily at Harry.

"I doubt it will make much difference," said Professor McGonagall coldly, "unless a mad axe-man is waiting outside the doors to slaughter the first into the entrance hall."

Even Ron laughed. Professor Trelawney looked highly affronted.

"Coming?" Harry said to Hermione.

"No," Hermione muttered, "I want a quick word with Professor McGonagall."

"Probably trying to see if she can take any more classes," yawned Ron as they made their way into the entrance hall, which was completely devoid of mad axe-men.

When they reached the portrait hole, they found Sir Cadogan enjoying a Christmas party with a couple of monks, several previous headmasters of Hogwarts, and his fat pony. He pushed up his visor and toasted them with a flagon of mead.

"Merry — hic — Christmas! Password?"

"Scurvy cur," said Ron.

"And the same to you, sir!" roared Sir Cadogan as the painting swung forward to admit them.

Harry went straight up to the dormitory, collected the Firebolt and the Broomstick Servicing Kit Hermione had given him for his birthday, brought

them downstairs, and tried to find something to do to the Firebolt; however, there were no bent twigs to clip, and the handle was so shiny already it seemed pointless to polish it. He and Ron simply sat admiring it from every angle until the portrait hole opened, and Hermione came in, accompanied by Professor McGonagall.

Though Professor McGonagall was head of Gryffindor House, Harry had seen her in the common room only once before, and that had been to make a very grave announcement. He and Ron stared at her, both holding the Firebolt. Hermione walked around them, sat down, picked up the nearest book, and hid her face behind it.

“So that’s it, is it?” said Professor McGonagall beadily, walking over to the fireside and staring at the Firebolt. “Miss Granger has just informed me that you have been sent a broomstick, Potter.”

Harry and Ron looked around at Hermione. They could see her forehead reddening over the top of her book, which was upside down.

“May I?” said Professor McGonagall, but she didn’t wait for an answer before pulling the Firebolt out of their hands. She examined it carefully from handle to twig-ends. “Hmm. And there was no note at all, Potter? No card? No message of any kind?”

“No,” said Harry blankly.

“I see . . . ,” said Professor McGonagall. “Well, I’m afraid I will have to take this, Potter.”

“W-what?” said Harry, scrambling to his feet. “Why?”

“It will need to be checked for jinxes,” said Professor McGonagall. “Of course, I’m no expert, but I daresay Madam Hooch and Professor Flitwick will strip it down —”

“Strip it down?” repeated Ron, as though Professor McGonagall was mad.

“It shouldn’t take more than a few weeks,” said Professor McGonagall. “You will have it back if we are sure it is jinx-free.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it!” said Harry, his voice shaking slightly.

“Honestly, Professor —”

“You can’t know that, Potter,” said Professor McGonagall, quite kindly, “not until you’ve flown it, at any rate, and I’m afraid that is out of the question until we are certain that it has not been tampered with. I shall keep you informed.”

Professor McGonagall turned on her heel and carried the Firebolt out of the portrait hole, which closed behind her. Harry stood staring after her, the tin of High-Finish Polish still clutched in his hands. Ron, however, rounded on Hermione.

“What did you go running to McGonagall for?”

Hermione threw her book aside. She was still pink in the face, but stood up and faced Ron defiantly.

“Because I thought — and Professor McGonagall agrees with me — that that broom was probably sent to Harry by Sirius Black!”